

table and reading an entry a day would constitute a rather useful refresher course in the history of Christian thought. It is a pleasure to recommend it.

(A curious gentleman called 'Epipanius' makes his entry on p. 289!)

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Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul, Tony Hendra,
London: Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 272, ISBN 0141020784.
£8.99

When the words 'international bestseller' appear on the cover of a paperback, we do well to be suspicious. International bestsellers tend to be frothy and trashy fiction or else the biography of a dim-witted sportsman or showbiz star. But who would believe that a book about a contemplative monk, who rarely emerges from his monastery, could sell like hot cakes? No one could believe it until after reading this remarkable spiritual autobiography.

Tony Hendra is a successful satirist, best known in Britain as one of the creators of the *Spitting Image* television puppets and in America as a stalwart of *National Lampoon* magazine, movies and television shows. But he was a late convert to satire. His original ambition was to become a monk.

Hendra was fourteen and in disgrace when he first visited Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight. He was the unfortunate (and largely innocent) third of a love-triangle and was dragged there by the irate husband, a devout Catholic. Fearing wrath and retribution, Tony suddenly found himself being counseled by the most wonderful man he had ever met. Father Joe was a huge, gangling, knobbly-kneed, stammering mountain of goodwill and Christian compassion. Father Joe soon put an end to the illicit relationship and then, without preaching, lecturing or any pretentious piety, guided Tony into a new awareness of the God of love.



Because of his hero-worship of Father Joe, the youthful Tony set his sights on becoming a monk himself. His renewed embrace of Catholicism was marked by ‘certainty’, a word that in the sphere of religion is a sure sign that trouble lies ahead. Sure enough, Tony was soon in a crisis of belief. But Father Joe understood how youthful certainty needs to give way to a more mature relationship with God and provided help along the way towards adult faith.

However, at Cambridge University Tony discovered satire and girls. He not only abandoned his vocation to be a monk, he also ditched his faith. In the years after graduation as he climbed the ladder of success in the cut-throat world of glossy magazines and TV comedy, Tony made frequent trips to the abbey to consult his spiritual mentor, the one anchor in a life adrift amid storms and shipwreck. Despite his atheism, his dissolute lifestyle and a broken marriage, he found his ‘soul friend’ not only compassionate and understanding but also shrewd enough to point the way to a life which is more than ambition, egotism, greed and devil-take-the-hindmost.

Many profound lessons are to be drawn from Tony Hendra’s experience. This book proclaims the incarnation, for it is in Christ-like people that we encounter Christ, it is human love that speaks most eloquently of divine love. Every word spoken by Father Joe ‘was drawn from a deep well of generosity.’ Hendra has grasped the heart of the Word made flesh when he asserts, ‘The God-thing is inconceivable without a human body as a medium.’

This book proclaims a theology of mission which is based on ripeness. It is not good enough to bombard people with their need to accept Christ. Instead, they need to be helped along the way to salvation one step at a time, recognizing that they are often in need of milk rather than solid food. Back-sliding among the faithful is not a disaster to be deplored, but an inevitable stage in our pilgrim’s progress, which should be understood and ministered to.

This book proclaims the miracle of Christian community. Faced with that existentialist slogan, ‘hell is other people’, Father Joe responds: ‘I

think it's p-p-popycock. How can hell be others? God is manifested in others.'

How does the story end? Does Tony regain his faith? Is Father Joe defeated by the cynical and heartless post-modern age? This is a rare thing, a 'religious' book which will be spoiled for the reader if the reviewer reveals the ending. It is sufficient to say that Hendra's achievement is a delightful celebration of Christian faith and the caring Church. One envies the reader his or her first encounter with the amazing Father Joe.

If you like your Christianity clear cut and simple with every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed, do not read this book. But if you are the sort of person who needs to encounter the generous and warm-hearted God who welcomes home the prodigal, then take the trouble to make the acquaintance of Father Joe.

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Peace, Toleration and Decay: the Ecclesiology of Later Stuart Dissent, Martin Sutherland, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003, pp. 240, ISBN 1842271520. £19.99

Martin Sutherland's book is the fruit of his doctoral research into the life and writings of John Howe. Some of the partisanship which flows from the research still shows in the text, which continually emphasises the theme that Richard Baxter has been credited with too much influence in later Stuart dissent and that Howe has been underestimated. As a corrective this is an essential message but the danger is that Baxter comes near to being damned with faint praise. As Sutherland convincingly demonstrates, Baxter and Howe represent two schools of dissent, sometimes described as Presbyterian and Congregational, both of which flourished in the late seventeenth

